

BACKTALK

KUDOS FOR KOHN

Even though I retired a decade ago, I have kept up with the bubbling controversies that have historically beset our public schools. When I scanned the cover of the April *Kappan*, I found "Test Today, Privatize Tomorrow," the intriguing title of Alfie Kohn's lead article. I made time to find out what he had to say about the two great threats to our American system of public education: the testing mania and the shameful attacks by business interests that I believe are designed to dismantle a system that has made a valiant effort to provide equal access to education for all children.

After reading Kohn's well-documented analysis, I want to commend him for writing and the *Kappan* for publishing such a cogent description of what the No Child Left Behind scheme is intended to accomplish. I wish to pay tribute to Kohn for helping to expose the right-wing business ideologues and their political cronies who want to pour our tax dollars into privatized voucher programs in order to fatten their own wallets. Since the public has consistently rejected their voucher efforts at the polls, they mimic the chameleon and change their campaign rhetoric to "school choice" in order to hoodwink voters.

Alfie Kohn has put it all together for me. I am now one fan of his who will urge public school advocates to arm themselves with the ammunition he provides. The Goliath of big business, with the backing of the right wing, can pour millions into campaigns to destroy public education. As in the Bible story, though, we Davids can save the public schools. — *Robert W. Bogen*, executive di-

We welcome comments on *Kappan* articles. Address letters to Backtalk, Phi Delta Kappan, P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402; e-mail: kappan@kiva.net. Letters selected for publication may be edited for space and clarity. Please hold your comments to no more than 250 words. — *The Editors*

rector, Tennessee Retired Teachers Association, Nashville.

AT IT AGAIN!

When I opened the April *Kappan* and saw yet another article by Alfie Kohn claiming that a national effort focused on the education of all children was certain to presage the end of the civilized world as we know it, I was incredulous that he still did not get it.

When I found Paul Reville's article some 20 pages later, I felt better. Here was evidence that one state with the conviction and leadership required by the task has the hard evidence that Kohn's theses are just flat-out wrong. While Massachusetts has had its share of troubles, many of them whipped up by Kohn, who lives in that state, I have yet to see the evidence that the public education system there has fallen apart.

What Kohn and other critics seem incapable of understanding is that No Child Left Behind has as its basis the civil rights concept that this nation owes every child an excellent education, not just those who live in the upper-income suburbs that surround every major city, including Boston. When will critics like Kohn understand that at its core what NCLB says to states is that they must actually deliver the education that their own state constitutions require — and be accountable for doing so?

The conspiracy theories that Kohn concocts are ridiculous. Knowing members of Congress like George Miller (D-Calif.), Mike Castle (R-Del.), and others, I can assure *Kappan* readers that their support of the federal law comes neither from their membership in a great right-wing conspiracy nor from being duped by the same. Most of us who support the law and understand that some fixes are required, as has been the case in every federal law going back to Title I in 1965, care deeply about the children of this nation.

So let's get on with the work at hand. Just think of what all this negative energy being hurled at NCLB might do if it were used to actually improve the lot of all chil-

dren. — *Christopher T. Cross*, distinguished senior fellow, Education Commission of the States, Denver, and chairman of Cross & Joftus, LLC, Danville, Calif.

KOHN'S ACCURACY QUESTIONED

Alfie Kohn made several assertions in his article "Test Today, Privatize Tomorrow" (April), which bear on my character adversely. All of them are wrong and, I believe, motivated by malice. A full response to Kohn's charges has been posted on my website (www.johntayorgatto.com). Visitors to the website may read the complete text of my latest book, *The Underground History of American Education*, without charge and decide for themselves the accuracy of Kohn's charges. — *John Taylor Gatto*, New York, N.Y.

THE AUTHOR RESPONDS

I appreciate the kind words from Robert Bogen and also from others who wrote to me directly in support of my analysis of the privatization agenda that underlies much of what is billed as school reform. I expected that my short digression to raise questions about John Taylor Gatto's views on public education might elicit a response from him, but I'm puzzled about why he has construed a substantive disagreement as an attack on his character, and, moreover, one motivated by malice. I know nothing about Mr. Gatto's character — indeed, I met him only once, at a fundraiser last year during which we had a brief but pleasant conversation — and have no idea why he would erroneously assume that someone who doesn't see eye to eye with him must be driven by darker motives.

Likewise, I wonder why Christopher Cross feels it necessary to strike wildly at a straw man, attributing caricatured sentiments to me such as that testing means "the end of the civilized word as we know it" and that "the public education system [in Massachusetts] has fallen apart." Rather than offering a reasoned rebuttal, he asserts that opponents of NCLB just don't "get it" and, indeed, are "incapable of understanding"

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the truth. Then he tries to contrast supporters of high-stakes testing, who care about children, with critics, who are just hurling "negative energy." (How does one hurl energy, by the way?) His unsupported assertion that NCLB furthers the cause of civil rights, meanwhile, isn't likely to persuade the growing number of people who are recognizing that the law's effects are very nearly the opposite of what he claims, for reasons outlined in my article.

It is rather flattering, however, to be blamed for having "whipped up" many of the educational "troubles" in Massachusetts — by which I assume he means opposition to the state's standards-and-testing apparatus. I would love to take credit for that, but teachers, students, and parents in these parts have discovered on their own just how destructive that apparatus really is — and they are unlikely to share Cross's view that Paul Reville's apologia for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) constitutes "hard evidence." In fact, the system Reville describes in his article is virtually unrecognizable to anyone in the state who has watched as these tests have cast a pall over classrooms, significantly reducing the time available for meaningful learning — with schools in low-income areas hardest hit by the all-consuming imperative to raise scores. At the same time, thanks to MCAS, more of the most vulnerable students are failing to graduate, a fact disguised by the state department of education's decision not to count as dropouts those kids who leave

school well in advance of the do-or-die test.

It's interesting that Cross mentions Reville's support for high-stakes testing in Massachusetts to bolster his own defense of NCLB. If you weren't reading carefully, you might assume Reville shares his breathless enthusiasm for the new law. I'll let him have the last word since he's the one commentator Cross chooses to cite: "It is not clear that more tests and mandates dictated by the federal government will boost state and local capacity to educate all their students to reasonably high levels. We do need Washington to pay attention, to support state reforms, and to insist on rigor and fairness — but a new labyrinth of requirements may just overwhelm all of our good intentions."

— Alfie Kohn.

CORRECTION

In the May issue, an editing error in "Just Give It to Me Straight," by T. A. Callister and Nicholas Burbules, gave the incorrect URL for the Peacefire website. It should have read www.peacefire.org. — *The Editors*.

AN UNPOPULAR STAND

Bravo for James Kauffman, Kathleen McGee, and Michele Brigham, authors of "Enabling or Disabling? Observations on Changes in Special Education" (April). They had the courage to take an unpopular stand, and they provided indisputable evidence to support their position. Administrators and counselors have gone so over-

board in "selling" inclusion as a right that it appears to be the only positive solution for children with disabilities.

The authors correctly point out that we have seemingly lost our sense that special education is a needed, effective, and accountable support service. Many parents now view special education services as a negative option to be avoided at all costs. They hold the view that the opportunity for their children to gain social skills with their peers in the regular classroom greatly outweighs the academic instructional program available in the special education classroom.

When I was a director of special education, I routinely counseled parents to balance the positive impact of the social experiences available through inclusion with the need for an individualized academic program in the special education classroom.

— Lee B. Wirth, Mt. Pleasant, Mich.

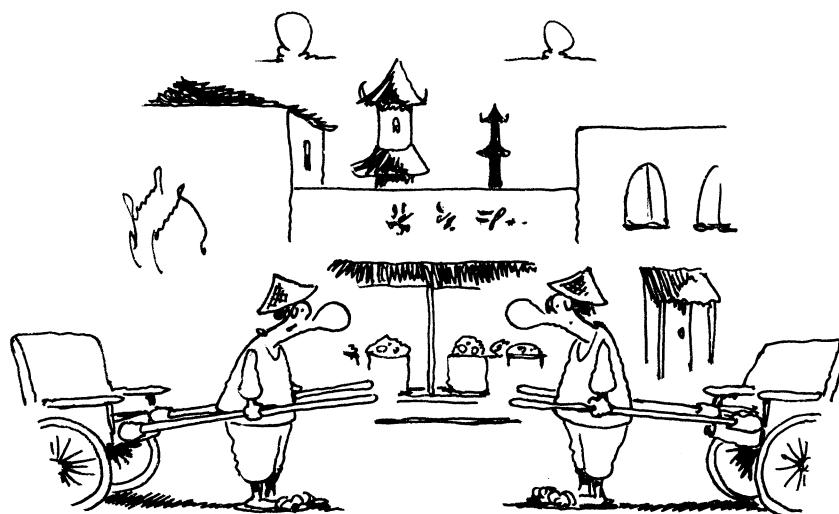
A MASTERPIECE OF OBFUSCATION

The February article by Frederick Hess, "What Is a 'Public School'? Principles for a New Century," is a masterpiece of obfuscation and disinformation. Among the serious omissions not adequately dealt with by those who responded are the following:

The overwhelming majority of nonpublic schools in the U.S. are pervasively sectarian institutions that commonly practice forms of indoctrination and discrimination that would be intolerable in real public schools.

For 35 years U.S. voters have consistently rejected school vouchers or their analogues in 25 statewide referenda by an average margin of 2-1.

Some other nations do, indeed, subsidize faith-based schools, but this has seldom been without serious controversy, as in the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Australia, and Canada. Hess dared not mention the case of the province of Newfoundland, where until the 1990s there were no public schools at all, only tax-supported faith-based schools. When Newfoundlanders finally had the chance to vote on the system, they rejected it by a margin of 3-1 in favor of U.S.-style religiously neutral public schools. — Edd Doerr, president, Americans for Religious Liberty, Washington, D.C. **K**



"I thought I had it bad until I met the guy who pulls the school bus."